Gender and Creation

Surveying Gendered Myths of Creativity, Authority, and Authorship

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The Anxiety of Competition: Gendered Authorship in Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master" and Vernon Lee's "Lady Tal"

1. Henry James: Exemplary Author of the Nineteenth Century

In the romantic comedy *Notting Hill*, featuring Julia Roberts as a very Julia Roberts-like movie actress and Hugh Grant as, basically, Hugh Grant, in this case a sheepish bookseller, the author Henry James plays a small but significant role. Anna Scott, the character played by Roberts, represents Hollywood tripe. Her stock-in-trade are highly successful but trashy action blockbusters. For the gauche, diffident regular guy William Thacker (Grant) she is, literally, a distant star, the unattainable embodiment of beauty and fame, but simultaneously not quite real, not quite to be taken seriously. Although the quintessential Hugh Grant character is not exactly an Einstein himself, Thacker's timid love is tinged with contempt for Anna's profession. The couple's shift from inconclusive flirtation to true love and commitment is signalled when Anna returns to London to make a Henry James film. This move suggests that Anna will not only pursue her career in a more meaningful way, but that her feelings for Thacker are genuine and enduring. Conversely, for the first time in their relationship he is really impressed by something she has done. Henry James thus functions as an established marker for cultural and emotional value. It is perhaps significant that we never learn on *which* novel the film is supposed to be based – it suffices that James appears as a logo, a brand name for quality.

Henry James's status as cultural capital has peregrinated from academic discourse, from the set reading lists of university classrooms, into popular culture, and back again. This is not only due to the fact that his novels, with their emphasis on manners, costume, and exquisite interiors are particularly suitable templates for glossy heritage films. Rather, I would like to argue, James's popular currency is connected to his positioning as an author. Generally dubbed 'the Master,' an epithet suggesting superiority, control, and consummate craftsmanship, James's construction of authorship is nevertheless marked by its in-betweenness: between realism and modernism, between a commitment to art for art's sake and a concern for economic viability, between male and female models of creativity. It is precisely these tensions that constitute points of contact for contemporary engagements with James, in critical theory as well as in creative practice.

The modern concept of the author which emerged and consolidated in the later part of the nineteenth century is unmistakably connected to Henry James. It seems that he satisfies, more than any other contender, the demands made on the author in recent literary theory. In other words, James succeeds in living up to Michel Foucault's concept of the author, in fulfilling the famous 'author functions' that Foucault has summarised as follows:

> The author explains the presence of certain events within the text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications (and this through an author's biography or by reference to his particular point of view, in the analysis of his social preferences and his position within a class or by delineating his fundamental objectives). The author also constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence. In addition, the author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts. [...] Finally, the author is a particular source of expression who, in more or less finished forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in a text, in letters, fragments, drafts, and so forth.
>
> (Foucault, 1995: 238)

In this much-quoted passage, we can detect two principles pulling in opposite directions: change and constancy. The function of the author consists precisely in holding together these diverging principles. In a given body of writing, we find "transformations, distortions, [...] modifications", we find an "unevenness of production," we find "contradictions". The authorial 'voice,' that is to say, does not remain always the same. There are shifts within an oeuvre, but also on the level of individual texts, explicable in terms of the conditions of production and the author's interaction with his or her environment. On the other hand, however, the author is "a principle of unity." Authorial unity can be constituted on three different levels: biography, style, and ownership. By referring to the life of an author, the inconsistencies and contradictions within an oeuvre can be subsumed within a coherent, teleological narrative, the author's development from beginnings through the middle years to the mature works (Jannidis et al. 1999: 3-35, 6), or the converse story of precocious success, struggle, and finally, decline and fall, as exemplified in the life of Edgar Allan Poe. Interestingly, Foucault's concept of authorship is distinct from critiques of the author in the tradition of New Criticism and Poststructuralism, in that he explicitly includes biography as one of the legitimate frames of reference for literary criticism.

The second level on which unity is constituted, style, is similarly more than an intrinsic feature of the text. It is the personal style through which the poet, since the early modern period, distances him- or herself from the literary tradition, thus carving out his or her own place in the canon. For Foucault, the author is the "source of expression" connecting the published texts to other non-literary or para-literary textual productions, such as letters, drafts, and, we could add with Genette, paratexts and epitexts such as the blurb, the interview or the author's web appearance. The author function thus does not contribute to the

constitution of a text that is radically 'disembedded' from ordinary discourse (Warning 1999: 313-45), but rather continuous with it. Finally, authorship is ownership. Since the eighteenth century, authorship is connected to the idea of copyright: the author, not the publisher, is the legal owner of the text and has a share in the profits generated by book sales (Jannidis et al. 1999: 7). This last aspect reached its peak in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of international copyright, a process in which Henry James was a key player.

As I have claimed in the beginning, Henry James is the paradigmatic author of the late nineteenth century, fulfilling the authorial function of unification on all three levels, that of biography, style, and ownership, or in other words, the personal, aesthetic, and economic dimension of authorship. It is his status as an exemplar of modern authorship which continues to ensure his currency in terms of cultural capital: the Henry James vogue in academic discourse as well as in popular culture.

To begin with the last aspect mentioned, the economic dimension of the authorial function, James was fairly successful in positioning himself in a literary market that had undergone dramatic changes in the decades before his arrival on the English scene.[1] As Michael Anesko has shown, "[t]he rapid rise and expansion of the reading public, the proliferation of periodicals, and the development of the modern publishing firm all contributed to the making of Henry James" (1986: 33). From the beginning of his career, James positioned himself as a transatlantic author, publishing for the American as well as the British market. Before the first international copyright agreement between Great Britain and the USA in 1891, American copyright protected only US citizens, while British law protected American authors residing in a British jurisdiction. James's continued residence in England was thus not only the expression of a cultural preference, but a shrewd economic choice:

> By securing English copyright for his wares and often selling them to English as well as American periodicals for serial use, James effectively doubled his income as a writer. Doubtful that he would ever have truly mass appeal, James wisely settled on a course that offered him at least the modern comforts of a discerning audience in two countries, when one market probably would have proved insufficient to his needs.
>
> (Anesko, 1986: 36)

Well-informed about both literary markets, James was to become one of the first authors resident in England to sign royalty contracts with his publishers or to employ a literary agent; according to Anesko, his transatlantic position made him "an ideal exponent for the professionalization of the literary vocation" (1986: 37). However, Henry James's economic position, although quite solid due to the serializations and book sales of his novels on the American and

[1] James's relationship to the literary market constitutes one of the most important strands in recent Henry James studies. See, for example, Salmon 1997.

British markets, always remained somewhat precarious. He never succeeded in becoming an author appealing to the masses, or in emulating the popular success of his compatriot Edith Wharton. This relative failure is connected to the second dimension of authorship, style or aesthetic positioning.

Henry James is famous, or possibly infamous, for his style. In particular in his later works, his long-windedness and obscurity become notorious, as his brother William did not fail to point out:

> Your last [letter] was your delightful reply to my remarks about your 'third manner,' wherein you said that you would consider your bald head dishonoured if you ever came to pleasing me by what you wrote, so shocking was my taste. Well! only write *for* me, and leave the question of pleasing open! I have to admit than in "The Golden Bowl" and "The Wings of the Dove," you have succeeded *in getting there* after a fashion, in spite of the perversity of the method and its *longness*, which I am not the only one to deplore.
>
> (James, 1920: 240)

In the exchange between the two brothers, the philosopher William is positioned as the common or even 'vulgar' reader who actually wants to understand what he is reading. In his letter, this empirical reader insists on reception, on the process of reading and understanding, as the legitimization of literature: "write *for* me," write for the reader. However, "the question of pleasing," the aesthetic appreciation of the text, has to be left "open." William James does not belong to the select class of discerning readers who can appreciate his brother's writing precisely for its intricacy, exquisiteness, and slow pace. For Henry James, on the contrary, literature is not primarily reception-oriented. As he argues in his programmatic essay "The Art of Fiction", the ultimate purpose of fiction is the transformation of 'life' into 'art', of a carefully observed empirical reality into a higher truth through an aesthetic process located in the author's mind. This is a process so subtle and complex that it ultimately eludes analysis, at least from the outside. Artistic creation is radically personal and privileged:

> The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant – no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes.
>
> (James, 1984: 350)

The purpose of the literary artwork thus lies in itself, or rather, in the quality of the execution. James's concept of fiction as an art thus insists on the radical primacy of the aesthetic; didactic and economic considerations are secondary and would, indeed, be detrimental to the process of artistic creation. Nevertheless, in his practice as a professional author as well as in his fiction, Henry James is extremely sensitive to the economic underpinning of art, both as an enabling condition and a danger to the novelist's ultimate aim, artistic

perfection. James explored the artist's dilemma, the commitment to perfection and the simultaneous necessity to earn one's bread, in several of his tales and novels. It is noteworthy that the artist constructed in these texts is predominantly male, although artistic sensitivity is not necessarily inscribed as masculine.

To turn now to the final aspect of the authorial function: the author's biography as the vanishing point of unity. According to David Lodge, James has always been "a biographer's writer because of the intriguing enigmas of his character and personal relationships" (2006: 5). Two aspects of this enigma have received considerable attention at the hands of literary critics and biographers as well as contemporary novelists: his sexuality, most often read as repressed homosexuality, and his relationship with women authors.

As is well known, James cultivated close friendships with various creative and intellectual women, such as his cousin Minnie Temple and his sister Alice, and with successful women authors, such as Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton who both were, in terms of sales and popular appeal, more successful than he was.[2] James's attitude to Woolson, Wharton, and other women authors such as Vernon Lee was an intriguing mix of sympathy, understanding, competition, and condescension. In particular his relationship to the American novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson, who committed suicide in Venice in 1894, has come under scrutiny on the part of biographers and novelists.[3] In an article on James's performance of authorship in his prefaces to the New York edition, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick distinguishes between shame and guilt: shame attaches to what one is, guilt to what one does (1995: 212). This distinction could be applied to the two biographical enigmas, James's sexuality, i.e. his relations with men, and his demeanour toward creative women. If shame is at the heart of James's resolute entrenchment in the closet, guilt may be the secret centre of his relations with women. Biographers and novelists set out in search of the Master's guilt regarding his dismissal of women's creativity, his failure of commitment, his selfishness. However, as I will try to show in my subsequent analysis of two tales on authorship, by James and by his contemporary and sometime friend Vernon Lee, these are not only features ascribed to the Jamesian author persona already in his lifetime, but actually satirised by himself. The author's egotism is a premise of his creativity and as such, a part of the Master's habitus. His egotism demands the sacrifice of woman. This formula is enacted in James's and Lee's tales – but nevertheless, it is also subverted in a way that complicates the simple opposition between a self-seeking author and a woman sacrificed on the altar of male creativity.

[2] On James's relationship to Woolson and Wharton, see Coulson 2007. On Temple and Woolson, see Gordon 1999.

[3] Recent novels featuring Henry James as the main character, and giving a prominent place to Constance Fenimore Woolson, are David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), Emma Tennant's *Felony. The Private History of the Aspern Papers* (2002) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2005).

2. Male Authorship and the Exchange of Women: "The Lesson of the Master"

In his tale "The Lesson of the Master" (1888/1892) James juxtaposes two performances of authorship and two models of artistic creation: a reception-oriented, economically viable output is contrasted with a production-oriented, aesthetic way of writing. The two protagonists, the established novelist Henry St George – the 'Master' of the title – and the neophyte Paul Overt, personify worldly success and the quest for aesthetic perfection, respectively. What is at stake in their encounter is not only the issue of true creativity, but its compatibility with individual happiness. In other words, questions negotiated in the text are, should an author have a wife? And conversely, can women understand artistic creation, and what is women's role in the creative process? Regarding the performance of authorship and its pragmatic realisation in terms of day-to-day writing, what degree of detachment and isolation on the one hand, sociability and participation in life on the other hand are desirable and indeed necessary? Are the two aims of artistic creativity, success and perfection, compatible – and what is the best way to achieve either of them, or both? These issues are acted out between St George and Overt in an oedipal struggle revolving around the anxiety of influence and the desire for the same woman.

In aesthetic terms, St George's career follows a downward trajectory: He started out with perfection, with three unsurpassed novels that established him as the Master of English fiction. But, in a sexually suggestive term used by St George himself, he could not 'keep it up.' His later work is compromised; however, the flaw is so subtle that it can be recognised only by a few cognoscenti, Paul Overt among them. In economic terms, on the other hand, St George is the embodiment of successful authorship, and in fact, it is his economic achievement that the young novelist covets. St George figures as the epitome of the author as bourgeois: he is always immaculately dressed, he possesses an elegant brougham and a comfortable town house, and he can afford to send his sons to the best schools. All these accoutrements of success appear in Paul Overt's eyes as highly desirable and yet subtly disturbing. Precisely because he is such an accomplished personification of worldly success, St George somehow seems to fall short of the ideal artist:

> He certainly looked better behind than any foreign man of letters – showed for beautifully correct in his tall black hat and his superior frock coat. Somehow, all the same, these very garments [...] were disconcerting to Paul Overt, who forgot for the moment that the head of the profession was not a bit better dressed than himself. He had caught a glimpse of a regular face, a fresh colour, a brown moustache and a pair of eyes surely never visited by a fine frenzy, and he promised himself to study these denotements on the first occasion. His superficial sense was that their owner might have passed for a lucky stockbroker – a gentleman driving eastward every morning from a sanitary suburb in a smart dog-cart.
>
> (James 2001: 124. Subsequent references as LM)

In his sartorial perfection, St George lacks the Dionysian element of the artist: the moment of unconventionality, transcendence and even madness that seems to be a prerequisite of creation. The puzzle that St George presents to his sceptical admirer is intimately connected to the Master's wife. Mrs St George also deploys "a high smartness of aspect" (LM 121). Her elegance and worldliness somehow make her unsuitable to be an author's Muse and helpmeet: "he himself would never have imagined the important little woman in the aggressively Parisian dress the partner for life, the *alter ego*, of a man of letters," indeed she looks more like "the wife of a gentleman who 'kept' books rather than wrote them" (LM 121). The author as bookkeeper is a recurrent image in Overt's assessment of St George. As stated above, Paul Overt's response to the couple is highly ambivalent, a mixture of admiration, envy, and misgiving; they are an "honourable image of success, of the material rewards and the social credit of literature" (LM 140).

However, and this is the first lesson the Master teaches his disciple, St George's economic success is predicated on the betrayal of his art. In order to produce books that appeal to an undiscriminating readership he had to sacrifice the very core and foundation of creativity, the striving for aesthetic perfection. St George couches his defection from the true but stony path to artistic heaven in terms of religious apostasy:

> 'Look at me well, take my lesson to heart – for it *is* a lesson. Let the good come of it at least that you shudder with your pitiful impression, and that this may help to keep you straight in the future. Don't become in your old age what I have in mine – the depressing, the deplorable illustration of the worship of false gods!'
>
> (LM 135)

Paul Overt gathers early on that the moving force behind St George's fall and damnation is Mrs St George. The sheer pressure of having to provide for a wife and family is an obstacle to perfection. But the Master's wife adopted a more active and, in Overt's eyes, more pernicious, diabolical role. As she reveals herself, she forced her husband to "burn up a bad book" (LM 122). Paul jumps to the conclusion that this must have been "one of her husband's finest things" (LM 122), and the book-burning becomes the symbol of a Faustian pact in which St George gave up his soul – his integrity as an artist – for the sake of money and reputation. In Paul's interpretation, Mrs St George appears as Mephistopheles, literary agent, and slave-driver all in one. She has not only domesticated the wild beast in the author's breast, she keeps him, literally, in a gilded cage in which his creativity is curtailed to the churning out of potboilers. His subservient position is flaunted by the Master himself, who exhibits his windowless study with masochistic relish:

> St George was in his shirt-sleeves in the middle of a large high room – a room without windows, but with a wide skylight at the top, that of a place of exhibition. […] At the end furthest from the door of admission was a tall desk, of great extent, at which the person using it could write only in the erect posture of a clerk in the counting-house; […] in his mind's eye, Paul beheld the Master pace to and fro during vexed hours – hours, that is, of admirable composition. […] 'Ah we're practical – we're practical!' St George said as he saw the visitor look the place over. 'Isn't it a good big cage for going round and round? My wife invented it and she locks me up here every morning.'
> (LM 148-49)

In this setting, again the image of the writer as bookkeeper – the very antithesis of the creative artist – is evoked, superimposed with the figures of an exhibit, perfectly illuminated through the skylight, and a captured beast put on display in its cage. Following his demonstration of the married writer's situation, its comforts and its price, St George proceeds to tempt his disciple with a kind of counter-pact to the conjugal contract in which he has betrayed his vocation: not only are women a hindrance to the author's creativity, he even insinuates that the renunciation of marital bliss will ensure Paul's aesthetic success as a writer. The conclusion inescapably forced on Paul is that "the artist shouldn't marry" (LM 153). In St George's strongly stated opinion, the belief that a wife can offer sympathetic support is a fallacy: "Women haven't a conception of such things," i.e. of the imperatives of artistic creation, nor are they capable to produce art, except "very badly indeed" (LM 153). In St George's narrative, women thus function as obstacles to creation, not as creative agents. The inescapable conclusion, the Master's lesson, for the budding artist is to eschew female company, to avoid the marital trap, and to dedicate himself heart and soul to the pursuit of perfection – a piece of advice which Paul ultimately decides to take, however, not without being tempted by the luxuriousness of the writer's prison:

> 'Lord, what good things I should do if I had such a charming place as this to do them in!' Paul reflected. The outer world, the world of accident and ugliness, was so successfully excluded, and within the rich protecting square, beneath the patronising sky, the dream-figures, the summoned company, could hold their particular revel.
> (LM 150)

For St George, the spacious but windowless study functions as a site of worldliness as well as of bondage. For Paul, on the contrary, it is a space of *un*-worldliness, of withdrawal, and consequently the ideal site of artistic production. Through the skylight, the author communicates with God alone. This difference in interpretation is significant. The material things in "The Lesson of the Master" all lend themselves to ambivalent readings. Whereas Paul interprets St George's immaculately tailored frock coat as the sign of the latter's selling-out to a philistine lifestyle, his own nearly identical clothes do not interfere with his vocation. The elegant brougham is a befitting means of transport for the successful man of letters as well as yet another symbol of St George's conspicuous consumption and meretriciousness. This sustained ambiguity of material objects should caution us against fully subscribing to St George's story of his life as "the deplorable illustration of the worship of false gods" (LM 135). Things may not be what they seem.

James's narrative about the Master's lesson can be read as an allegory on art and commercialisation. Following the critical success of his first novel, young Paul Overt finds himself at the crossroads, with Henry St George as a figure of both temptation and warning. St George exposes the dangers inherent in symbolically wedding "the mercenary muse" (LM 151), and in literally marrying the attractive, sympathetic book lover Marian Fancourt. In this reading, the plot would unfold according to the pattern of the traditional *Künstlernovelle*: the artist renounces personal happiness and follows his true vocation which culminates in the achievement of his masterpiece. In the end, the neophyte of the beginning has become a Master himself, untarnished by the artistic compromise of his predecessor. However, this is not at all what happens in "The Lesson of the Master". Although the plot of the artist's novella reverberates in the structure of James's tale, the pattern is significantly disrupted in several crucial points. In fact, the tale's narrative structure functions according to the principle of 'turning the screw of interpretation', as demonstrated in Shoshana Felman's analysis of *The Turn of the Screw*. Felman's main argument is that the merit of the two readings offered by the novel – that the ghosts are either 'real', responsible for the children's corruption, or figments of the governess's oversexed imagination – is undecidable. As readers, we cannot be sure whether we are reading a ghost story or a madness story. Not only that, readers are impelled to repeat the act of interpretation inscribed in the text, that is, "to perform the very act of textuality triggered by the ambiguity of sexuality" (Felman 1982: 114). The critical response advocated by Felman is to show, not *what* the story means, but *how* it produces its meaning, namely through the constitution of a narrative chain (1982: 119-21).

The narrative structure of "The Lesson of the Master" is much simpler than the one in *The Turn of the Screw*. Rather than multiple hypodiegetic narratives, we have a classical Jamesian impersonal narrator, with Paul Overt as the internal 'reflector', the figure through whose consciousness the events are relayed. Despite this narrative unity, the textual meaning remains elusive. Put differently, I would like to suggest that the allegorical reading of Paul Overt as the true artist and Henry St George as the mercenary hack does not quite meet the case. Rather, both the reflector and the observed character are unreliable, thus compounding the problem of interpretation. In the place of a neat allegory, we are offered a string of different readings, none of which can fully explain the enigma presented by St George.

Acting on St George's advice, Paul forsakes Marian Fancourt and spends the next two years abroad to complete his second novel. During his absence he is apprised of Mrs St George's death. In a letter, St George laments her demise,

now appreciating the "rare service" his wife rendered him by freeing him "to drive my pen, to shut myself up with my trade" (LM 159). This rather different construction of Mrs St George's role proves the first irritant to Paul: "But if she had been so clear a blessing what in the name of consistency had the dear man meant by turning *him* upside down that night – by dosing him to that degree, at the most sensitive hour of his life, with the doctrine of renunciation?" (LM 159) When, his manuscript in his pocket, Paul finally returns to London, he learns that Marian and St George are engaged to be married. Their glow of happiness renders them, in Paul's eyes, "almost stupid" (LM 163), "almost *banal*" (LM 164), thus supporting the view that human happiness and relevant creation are incompatible: St George has "ceased to count as a writer" (LM 164). Paul now has to ask himself whether St George had not orchestrated his renunciation with precisely this outcome in mind. In a final skirmish, St George denies the allegation, and in addition asserts that he saved Paul by taking Marian off his hands – in fact, that he sacrificed himself for the sake of Paul's literary career. As a corollary of his marriage, St George has given up writing.

So far the facts in the case, but the question is, what do they mean? Several readings suggest themselves, turning around the reliability and acumen of the reflector, Paul Overt, and the reflected figure, Henry St George. Paul is confronted with two basic alternatives which constitute the first two levels of interpretation: (1) On that fateful night in his study, St George gave his disciple honest advice. At the time, he could foresee neither his wife's death, nor his subsequent engagement to Marian. (2) From the start, St George was a double-dealing tempter, jealous of Paul's success and Marian's admiration. His complaints about his wife were hypocritical; in fact she enabled his productivity in the first place. In addition, he was aware of her severe illness, predicted her death and providently removed Paul from the scene to secure a free hand with Marian. In that case, Paul is indeed St George's "abject victim" (LM 151). A third interpretation, obviously not shared by the reflector and therefore only implicit, is possible: (3) Paul duped himself. Confronted with the alternative between worldly success and aesthetic achievement, he wanted both. His separation from Marian consequently was not a renunciation, but a postponement, to be revoked following the – economic as well as artistic – success of his second novel. This is confirmed by his reflections upon hearing the news of the engagement: their separation had been "a closed but not a locked door" which is only now "quite slammed in his face" (LM 151). Finally, and this is the interpretation I would like to advocate following Felman's lead: (4) The reader is duped by the author. The seductively simple allegorical reading, the alternative between economics and aesthetics, is a trap. Although the rejection of artistic compromise represented by Paul Overt is close to Henry James's own position as delineated in "The Art of Fiction", it would be fallacious to see the young writer simply as James's mouthpiece in the text. Only too palpably is he marked as unreliable: intellectually (because he fails to foresee the pitfalls of the Master's lesson) and morally (because he covets so much St George's riches). Conversely, St George's con – if that's what it is – is so dexterous, indeed so masterly, that we can't help enjoying it even at the expense of Paul's dismay.

Rather than being a straightforward confirmation of renunciation for the sake of art, the tale is an invitation to turn the screw of interpretation. The ending is open. Neither is it quite clear whether Paul will be as "wonderfully strong" (LM 166) and uncompromising as St George imputes him to be, nor do we know with final certainty that the regeneration due to marital bliss will not enable St George, after all, to produce a new masterpiece. Such an act of late creativity would be the final repudiation of the antithesis of economics and aesthetics, as well as the realisation of Paul's worst fear. The tale ends with an invitation to the reader to continue the process of interpretation, and an equivocal endorsement of the Master's lesson:

> *Is* he [really so strong]? the reader may ask in turn, if his interest has followed the perplexed young man so far. The best answer to that perhaps is that he's doing his best, but that it's too soon to say. When the new book came out in the autumn Mr and Mrs St George found it really magnificent. The former still has published nothing, but Paul doesn't even yet feel safe. I may say for him, however, that if this event were to occur he would really be the very first to appreciate it: which is perhaps a proof that the Master was essentially right and that Nature had dedicated him to intellectual, not to personal passion.
>
> (LM 167)

3. The Woman Author's Revenge: "Lady Tal"

Henry James's inadequacies in his dealings with women authors constitute a major interest for his biographers as well as for novelists. Curiously, among the many fictional and non-fictional explorations of James's relations with women, one important figure is omitted: the art critic and writer Vernon Lee. In her lifetime, Lee was best known for her aesthetic writings and her historical studies of Italian art. Today, her ghost stories are almost the only of her works remaining in print; however, in recent years there has been a revival of interest in her writings, including her aesthetic theories, and in her role as a public intellectual who happened to be a woman and a lesbian. She was well connected in literary circles; her friends and correspondents included Walter Pater, by whose aestheticism she was strongly influenced, and Henry James. However, her friendship with the latter, who tried to set himself up as her paternal mentor, was never wholly untroubled. Lee was not somebody who liked to be tutored. According to Christa Zorn, James "labelled Lee's assertiveness as unwomanly and herself as ugly" (2003: 11). Their friendship came to an end after the publication of "Lady Tal" (1892).

This tale, set among British and American expatriates in Venice, shares several features with "The Lesson of the Master": the encounter between two

writers, a Master and his disciple, one constituting a mystery for the other, a discussion of the problems of writing and the meaning of art, and most crucially, an exploration of the tension between an author's worldliness on the one hand and disengagement from the world on the other. The two main differences are that one of the writers, the disciple, is a woman, and that it is the disciple who is a puzzle for the Master. Where Lee departs most sharply from James is in her questioning of the primacy of the aesthetic at the expense of social commitment, and in her critique of the Jamesian author. In her reading, the author as Master is not the sharp analyst of reality as in James's aesthetic theory, but a limited figure struck with blindness concerning human relationships. What we would call today emotional intelligence belongs to his female disciple who resists being incorporated into the Jamesian text.

The protagonist and main focalizer is Jervase Marion, himself described as "a cosmopolitan American" and "an inmate of the world of Henry James and a kind of Henry James, of a lesser magnitude" (Lee 2008: 194. Subsequent references as LT). Like Henry St George and indeed like Henry James, Marion is aware that disinterest, detachment, even indifference are prerequisite to the author's psychological dissection of human beings:

> This passion for investigating into the feelings and motives of his neighbours was at once the joy, the pride, and the bane and humiliation of Marion's placid life. He was aware that he had, for years and years, cultivated this tendency to the utmost; and he was fully convinced that to study other folks and embody his studies in the most lucid form was the one mission of his life, and a mission in nowise inferior to that of any other highly gifted class of creatures. Indeed, if Jervase Marion, ever since his earliest manhood, had given way to a tendency to withdraw from all personal concerns, from all emotion or action, it was mainly because he conceived that this shrinkingness of nature (which foolish persons called egoism) was the necessary complement to his power of intellectual analysis; and that any departure from the position of dispassioned spectator of the world's follies and miseries would mean also a departure from his real duty as a novelist. To be brought into contact with people more closely than was necessary or advantageous for their intellectual comprehension; to think about them, feel about them, mistress, wife, son, or daughter, the bare thought of such a thing jarred upon Marion's nerve.
>
> (LT 220-21)

He has therefore condemned himself to a perpetual exile from the world of human passion and commitment; like Paul Overt, he has sacrificed the warmth of family life for the sake of his vocation. During a holiday in Venice, he meets Lady Atalanta Walkenshaw, to her friends Lady Tal, a rich Scottish expatriate, who is similarly cut off from humankind, but in her case not voluntarily. According to her late husband's testament, her inheritance will pass on to the next of kin if she remarries. The young woman is thus sentenced to a state of perpetual widowhood if she does not want to loose her very substantial fortune. In addition, with the death of her beloved only brother Lady Tal has lost the

emotional centre of her life. To fill the void, she has embarked on a career as a novelist, a course in which she enlists Jervase Marion's help. Initially rather appalled, Marion soon becomes fascinated by his new disciple, to the point where they meet daily to discuss her manuscript in addition to exchanging notes and revised chapters by messenger. His services range from correcting Lady Tal's punctuation and spelling to discussing plot construction and explaining the true purpose of art.

The reason for Marion's enthrallment is the discrepancy between Lady Tal's looks and the text she has produced. In appearance, Lady Tal, always immaculately dressed and made up, is statuesque, glowing with health, and endowed with a beautiful but blank, expressionless face – in Marion's view, she is "magnificent, conventional, and impassive" (LT 214). Her untroubled features seem to indicate that she has no worries, no feelings, no soul. By contrast, in the pages of her novel *Christina*, a tale of female suffering, Marion finds "the indications of a soul, a very decided and unmistakable soul" (LT 215). As a skilled physiognomist, Marion is intrigued by the disparity between Lady Tal's unruffled exterior and her troubled, sensitive interior which is indicated only in her writing. Following various attempts at explaining the mystery that are almost postmodern in their ingenuity – she didn't write it, she was unconsciously copying other novels, the effect was created by his, the reader's, intervention – Marion finally finds himself confronted with Lady Tal's quintessential humanity, and concomitantly, with his own human obligation to empathise and engage with another individual. Accused by Marion of emotional lack, she reveals her deep attachment to her brother – "the only person in the world who has ever understood me one bit" (LT 237) – and the pain she felt at his death, but which she chose not to disclose to the world. Lady Tal's unexpected confession makes a deep impression on Marion: he is "moved, horribly grieved, but at the same moment intensely glad" (LT 238). For the first time in his life, he has understood something truly deep about human nature. However, he fails to respond in an adequate way. Contrary to his true feelings, he makes a rather trite remark, instantly retreating into his protective shell of the cynical man of the world. Immediately after this failure in communication, the two writers begin a new game: each tries to turn the other into a fictional character, real only in so far as he or she plays a role in the respective novel each of them is writing. But whereas Marion imagines that he is the sole Master pulling the strings, Lady Tal is aware of what is going on and gives him ironic warning of her intention: "I shall borrow that remark and put it into *Christina*. You may use up any remark of mine, in return, you know" (LT 239).

For a Jamesian author, Marion is surprisingly unobservant. While he is fantasizing about the plot of his next novel, based on his own involvement with Lady Tal as her literary mentor and, possibly, her undeclared, uptight suitor, he is oblivious of a reciprocal reconstruction of his personality going on in her head. While he is busy revising her novel *Christina* and plotting his own novel,

he forgets that according to Henry James's theory of fiction, the true author grounds his creation in the accurate observation of life, in particular in psychological observation. Although life constitutes only a 'germ' that is then transformed through the author's autonomous execution into art, a deep albeit dispassionate understanding of the human psyche is a prerequisite for the creative process. Marion, on the contrary, not only fails to understand Lady Tal, he also subordinates the little he has understood to what he considers the exigencies of modern novel-writing. Despite his glimpse into Lady Tal's soul he dismisses the tragedy of her life as "not the right thing" (LT 242) for his novel, not artistic and modern enough. He continues to misread Lady Tal's genuine and deeply-felt emotions because they are obscured by her adherence to convention, and in consequence he overlooks his own conventionality both as a person and as an author. As a result, his own projected novel, strictly adhering to the conventions of modern fiction, is, in Marion's own assessment, "plucky, modern, artistic", culminating in "excessive sordidness" at the end (LT 243). However, his commitment to the bleakest realism is not only contrived and formulaic – and therefore very far removed from the perfect work of art in the Jamesian vein – but also a betrayal of his real experience of Lady Tal. Having witnessed not only her pain and loss, but also her unostentatious goodness to others, Marion has to convince himself that she deserves the fate he envisions for her in fiction:

> She would have a chance, say by marrying a comparatively poor man, of securing herself from that rising tide of worldly futility and meanness; the reader must think that she really was going to love the man, to choose him. Or rather, it would be more modern and artistic, less romantic, if the intelligent reader were made to foresee the dismal necessity of Lady Tal's final absorption into moral and intellectual nothingness. [...] It would make a capital novel.
>
> (LT 242-43)

Although he is pleased with the dire ending he is preparing for his heroine, Marion is haunted by a sense of his human failure, a "vague, disquieting sense of being a cad" (LT 243). He has let his friend down. However, the final twist comes when Lady Tal, having outstripped her mentor, sets herself on an equal footing as an author and a critic of fiction. In her counter-plot, Marion is debunked not only as a flawed character, but as a bad author. As she tells him, his projected plot is defective because it is unimaginative and old-fashioned – old-fashioned, because he underrates women's abilities, self-confidence and agency. He fails because he is patronising and patriarchal. By suggesting an alternative ending, Lady Tal emancipates both Marion's heroine and herself, and beats the Jamesian author with his own weapons:

> 'That's all!' mused Lady Tal. 'Doesn't it seem rather lame? You don't seem to have sufficient *dénouement*, do you? Why shouldn't we write that novel together? I'm sure I could help you to something more conclusive than that. Let me see. Well, suppose the lady were to answer: "[...] I am going to be a great painter – no, sculptor, I mean – and make pots of money; so suppose we get married." Don't you think Mr Marion, that would be more *modern* than your *dénouement*? [...] We ought to write that novel together, because I've given you the ending – and also because I really can't manage another all by myself, now that I've got accustomed to having my semicolons put in for me –'
>
> (LT 261).

In this creative partnership, the male author is no longer the Master in total control of the creative process. He is reduced to a pedestrian role in a model of creativity conceptualised as collaborative. He still has the greater technical expertise, he knows where to put in the semicolons. However, it is his female co-author who contributes the fresh, imaginative elements, who is the true source of creativity.

To conclude, Vernon Lee explores the relationship between life and art which is also central to James's tales about artistic creativity: life not only as the germ of fiction, but also as the milieu in which fiction is necessarily produced, a milieu that is both enabling and obstructive. In contrast to "The Lesson of the Master", where it is taken for granted that authorship is male, Lee's focus lies on gendered creativity, on the interaction between male patronage, simultaneously helpful and oppressive, and the struggle for female authorship. In this competitive relationship, the female author emerges triumphant. In Lee's revision of the Jamesian artist's tale, the male author as Master is exposed as deficient on the human as well as on the aesthetic level. However, it has to be emphasised that the dismissal of female creativity in "The Lesson of the Master" originates from Henry St George who is in his turn an object of James's satirical examination of authorship. It is too facile to equate either St George or Lee's Jervase Marion fully with the real author Henry James, and to dismiss James as a misogynist. James's engagement with women authors and with gendered creativity is more complex than that. As Victoria Coulson persuasively argues, James in fact exhibits "an affiliative communion with feminine structures of subjectivity that is unparalleled elsewhere in the work of nineteenth-century male writers" (2007: 5). Let it be added that James's own satire of the Jamesian author, both in the guise of the Master and the ambitious neophyte, is in many ways more devastating than Vernon Lee's mocking portrait of the artist as a middle-aged bachelor.

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